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ACHARYA RAY

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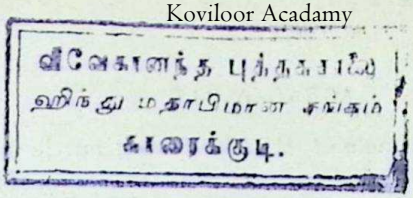

ACHARYA RAY

Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray was born on August 2, 1861, in the village of Raruli in the Jessore District of Bengal. He came of a noble family, many of whose scions held important positions under the Nawabs and later under the East India Company.

His grandfather was the Sheristadar at Jessore and his father was an educated man of liberal views. He was well versed in English and Persian and knew Sanskrit and Arabic. He held hetrodox views and was a pioneer of the educational movement in the district. His treatment of his sons was very liberal and affectionate. He was a Zamindar and was held in high esteem, while his aesthetic tastes and fervent ideas of " Young Bengal " drew him into the intimate circles of the shining lights of those days.

For the education of his sons, he removed to Calcutta in 1870, and Prafulla and his elder brother were admitted in the Hare School. The relations between the father and sons were most frank and cordial. The boys learnt more from their father than from the school or the books. Even at an early age Prafulla developed an inordinate thirst for knowledge and delighted in reciting whole passages of Shakespeare, and strange as it may seem in one of the greatest chemists of modern times, he was very fond of Geography and History, and the prizes in these subjects became almost his monopoly.

Thirst for Knowledge

At the age of 13 he had a bad attack of dysentery, which has till this day remained almost chronic. He had to give up the school, but that only turned out a blessing in disguise.

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Free from the trammels of the deadening curriculum of the class-room, he got abundant opportunities for reading to his heart's content. And daily, he devoured all the books in his father's library.

He read right through all the available classics of English literature and from an old copy of a Latin book taught himself that old and classic language. Seven months later, he recovered a little, and joined the Albert School, a new institution founded by Kesub Chandra Sen. From early age, he was irresistably drawn towards the Brahmo Samaj and the selfless band of young men of the Samaj who worked in the schools impressed the boy very much. He topped the list in every examination and basket loads of prize-books awaited him every year.

After passing the Entrance Examination, he joined the Metropolitan Institute of Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. At this time his father suffered serious losses; one by one their estates had to go, and their Calcutta establishment was broken up.

At Edinburgh

But Prafulla's studies went on as usual at Calcutta, and as an external student, he attended the lectures in chemistry and physics at the Presidency College. By this time he had mastered Sanskrit, French and German also. While reading in the B. A. class, he secretly prepared for the competitive examination for the Gilchrist Scholarship examination. And one fine morning, Calcutta was astir and the whole College was agreeably surprised to see that Prafulla had won the coveted scholarship, the only other student in the whole of India being a Parsee from Bombay.

At once Prafulla wrote to his parents to allow him to go to England, to which they readily assented. Full of hopes, the young graduate embarked on his voyage. Lord Sinha and Sir J. C. Bose were already in England and Prafulla stayed

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with them for a few days, before starting to Edinburgh where he joined the University for the B.Sc. His Chemistry teacher was the famous Professor Alexander Cum Brown. Though reserved and shy by nature, Prafulla made some lasting friends at the University and some of his fellow-students also rose to as high a position in the scientific world. Sir James Walker and Alexander Smith of the text-book fame, as also Hugh Marshall, the famous discoverer of cobalt alum were his fellow-students and intimate friends. He also won the distinction of being the Vice-President of the University Chemical Society, the president being the Professor of Chemistry.

Essay On India

It was at this period that a very important incident of his life happened. In the year 1885, Lord Iddesleigh the Lord Rector of the University, who was for sometime the Secretary of State for India, announced that a prize would be awarded for the best essay on "India before and after the Mutiny." And Prafulla felt impelled to compete for the prize. His innate love of history was rekindled and with an assiduous industry, he ransacked the whole library for books. The enthusiasm and industry displayed by him on this occasion was quite characteristic of the great mind. He read all the books avialable on the subject. And having found out that a knowledge of political economy was essential for the task, he immediately fell upon all the treatises on ecomics relating to India. Not a single article in the authoritative reviews escaped his notice and he also went through all the relevent reports of the Parliamentary proceedings. And the result was a masterly treatise.

But he did not get the prize, though the adjudicators described it as "bearing marks of rare excellence." And the reason is not far to seek; for they said the "book, though remarkable, was full of bitter diatribes against British rule."

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His views were but eloquent pleadings, spiced, of course, with certain warnings, as the following few sentences from the essay will show:

"England unfortunately now refuses to recognize the hard and irresistable logic of facts, and does her best to strangle and smother the nascent aspirations of a rising nationality. The selfish, and therefore, harsh and cruel exigencies of an alien rule have imposed various disqualifications and disabilities upon the children of the soil ..."

And again he asks: "Is there no golden mean between stout and stubborn refusal on the one hand and humiliating surrender on the other? These are strange times we live in. An institution seven centuries old, becomes in the course of as many days branded as a 'nest of sinecurists'. Who knows to-morrow another Howarth will have to denounce in equally unmeasured terms the India Council and a dozen other obnoxious bureaus? Compromises and half-measures, and halting policies, have been tried elsewhere with signal failure. Fifty years of concessions to Ireland have only served to embitter her feelings against Great Britain. Will the lesson which the sister island has taught us be lost upon India?"

Faith and Disillusionment.

No wonder then, that such passages failed to get the prize from an ex-Secretary of State for India.

But Ray got the manuscript back and privately had it printed. He added this appeal to the students of the University among whom he circulated the book:

"The lamentable condition of India at present is due to England's culpable neglect of, and gross apathy to the affairs of that Empire. England has hitherto failed—grievously failed—in the discharge of her duties to India. It is to you the rising generation of this country that we look for the inauguration of a more just, generous and humane policy in

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India—a policy which will not seek a justification in such platitudes as 'inevitable course' 'Non-possumus' and 'eternal fitness of things.' In you are centred our hopes."

In those days, the Acharya admits that he was a believer in the "doctrine of mendicancy." But now at the age of three-score and ten he knows better.

"With child-like simplicity" says Sir Prafulla, "I held that if the wrongs and the grievances under which our country groaned could be brought home to the British people, they would be remedied. The disillusionment was not long in coming. There is not in the history of the world, a single instance of a dominant race granting concession to a subject people of its own free will and accord. Even in a free country like England, the Barons making common cause with the yeomanry extorted the great Magna Charta from the reluctant hands of King John and in the great Civil War, the English people had to wade through pools of blood before they could establish the constitutional principle, 'No taxation without representation.' "

Sir Prafulla sent a copy of his book to John Bright, with a covering letter about the annexation of Burma. Bright acknowledged the book in the following letter :

"I regret with you and condemn the course of Lord Dufferin in Burma. It is a renewal of the old system of crime and guilt, which we had hoped had been abandoned for ever. There is an ignorance on the part of the public of this country, and great selfishness here and in India as to our true interests in India. The departure from morality and true statesmanship will bring about calamity and perhaps ruin, which our children may witness and deplore."

Love of Chemistry

But his fervour in this direction had to be suppressed before the more pressing calls of the B. Sc. examination. After

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that he began busily preparing for his thesis for the Doctorate which he got with distinction. He was the only candidate for the year and doctorates in those days were very rare.

By this time Prafulla's passion for chemistry had became so great that he desired to stay for a year more at Edinburgh. The University authorities welcomed his decision and gladly awarded him the Hope Prize Scholarship. The trustees of the Gilchrist Endowment also granted him a further sum of £ 50.

As Hope Prize scholar, he helped the chemistry professors in their research work and gained considerable practical experience. It was while working under the instructions of Dr. Ray, and analysing one of the salts he had given that Hugh Marshall discovered Cobalt Alum, which at a single bound placed him amongst the foremost savants of his time.

In 1888, he decided to return home. The University authorities gave him splendid testimonials and Sir William Muir wrote a strong letter of recommendation to Sir Charles Barnard, a member of the India Council, who took a kindly interest in the welfare of Indian students. Dr. Ray came to London, and the good Sir Charles tried his best to get him entered in the All-India Educational Service. But it was of no use. The All-India Services were kept as a sacred preserve only for Englishmen and all the distinctions of the great chemist could not induce the Secretary of State to break the iron tradition. After waiting in vain for more than two months in London, Dr. Ray gave it up as hopeless. His funds were running low; and dejected and disappointed, he booked his passage home and arrived at Calcutta in the August of 1888, with hardly a penny in his pocket.

Cruel Rebuffs

The history of the admission of Indians to the higher services is, to say the least, most painful. It is, as the Acharya

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Dev himself remarks, a " history of good intentions and large promises, but poor performances." Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose too, who had returned three years earlier, had to fight against the same odds. It was with a great deal of difficulty and after consenting to the humiliating condition of receiving two-thirds of the salary of an European officer on the same grade that he was admitted into that Service.

For about a year Dr. Ray had to keep quiet in Calcutta without a job—under the hospitable roof of Dr. Bose, utilizing his time in reading the available chemical and other scientific journals.

After a long period of waiting, he was taken into the Provincial service and appointed as an assistant professor in the Presidency College on a pay of Rs. 250. Fresh from the land of liberty as Ray was, he was full of mettle and exaggerated notions about the rights of the people. He went straight to Darjeeling to speak directly to the Director of Public Instruction about the injustice done to him, but the official flared up and the brilliant scientist had to pocket his pride. But for that rub, he got on well with his work. His creative mind could not, however, be confined merely to the test tube. The vast natural resources of Bengal and the heavy toll paid every year to foreign countries over every tiny article and the poor development in technology, disturbed his thoughts. He also felt the peril of the mass production of graduates, and began to consider schemes of imparting industrial education to the youth of the land.

The vast quantities of imported drugs that drained crores of rupees every year, drew his first attention and he decided to manufacture them in Bengal itself. Thus was the foundation of the Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works laid. The chequered history of that pioneer company is a chapter by itself and Acharya Dev nurtured the tender plant with the affection of a mother. The odds against which it fought, and the sacrifice it entailed on the part of the distinguished scientist and his self-less associates, deserve an unique place of honour in the annals of Indian economic development. Started with a meagre capital of Rs. 500, today it has grown into a vast concern with assets amounting to more than half-a-crore.

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In 1894, his father died and that was a grievous blow to Prafulla Chandra. After disposing of the family estates to clear off the debts, he came back to Calcutta to resume his activities in chemical research.

Rise to International Fame

It was at this time that he discovered Mercurous Nitrite, which marked a turning point in his career. It opened up a new chapter in chemistry and was hailed throughout the scientific world as a discovery of great importance. Congratulatory letters from eminent chemists like Roscoe, Divers, Berthelot, Victor Meyer, Volhad and a host of others poured on him and impelled him on to greater activity and more zealous experiments.

The great French savant Berthelot was delighted to correspond with him and his appreciative references to Dr. Ray as a great savant, led the Acharya to write his monumental book, *History of Hindu Chemistry*.

Dr. Ray had to work long and hard at this immortal work. For months he waded through long forgotten manuscripts in Sanskrit and ransacked every library throughout the length and breadth of the country. He went to every Kaviraj of repute, tried to unearth as much information as possible of this ancient and neglected science of Hindusthan. The result was indeed a vast " monumental labour of love" as the *Times of India* hailed it. It proved beyond the shadow of doubt, that chemistry had made great progress in ancient India and assigned to India the priority in the use of metallic drugs. All the foremost scientific journals of the world welcomed it as a great work. Berthelot devoted more than fifteen pages of his *Journal des Savants* for its review. Chemists of every nation studied its contents and requests came pouring in for permission to translate it into the foremost European languages.

Triumphal Tour of Europe

In 1904, exactly twenty-two years after his first voyage to England, Dr. Ray started on his second tour of Europe. In London, the foremost chemists of the day extended him a warm welcome and for a time he carried on his experiments in the Davy-Faraday Research Laboratory. Later he visited Edinburgh, when his old colleagues and fellow students

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honoured him. After that he made a tour of the continent where he was received with open arms by eminent savants. In Paris he met Berthelot, and in Germany, Vont Hoff, the great Dutch Chemist, was delighted to see him. He visited the famous laboratories of Berne, Geneva and Zurich and everywhere a cordial reception awaited him.

When he returned to India after this triumphal tour he took up his researches with renewed zeal. In 1912, he again visited Europe as the delegate of the Calcutta University for the Congress of the Universities of the Empire in London. He read a paper on the vapour density of Ammonium Nitrite, which in his own modest words, "created a stir in the chemical world."

Meanwhile stupendous changes has come over India. The Bengal Partition agitation had awakened the national conscience and brought an intellectual awakening in its wake. Under the brilliant Vice-Chancellorship of Ashutosh Mukerji, the Calcutta University had become a splendid institution and due to the munificence of patriotic sons of India, various Chairs for Science had been endowed.

The New College of Science

The munificence of Sir Tarakanath Palit enabled the University to set up a new College of Science and in 1916 Dr Ray was offered the Chair of Chemistry, compelling him to leave the Presidency College, where he had worked for more than a quarter of a century with Sir J. C. Bose and other affectionate colleagues. In this new sphere, a brilliant band of young scientists soon rose to eminence under his direction. He founded the Indian Chemical Society and had the gratification to realize his long-cherished dream of seeing modern India taking her place in the world of science.

Now, as in his earlier life, his activities did not stop with the college and the turn in National politics led him to take an active life even in that sphere. So on the eve of the enactment of the Rowlat Bill he came as a speaker at the mass meeting of protest organized at the Albert Hall. And when the great Deshabandu was incarcerated during the non-co-operation fight, "his heart went out Chitaranjan in his hour of trial" and the letter he wrote to Mrs. Das vibrates with emotion.

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Relief Work in Bengal.

In 1921, shortly after he had returned from his fourth visit to England, a terrible famine broke out in Khulna, and Dr. Ray organized a Relief Committee, which did wonderful service. But it was during the great flood of 1922, that his organizing ability and the magic of his name came out at their best and endeared him to the heart of every son of Bengal and of India. That flood was the outcome of a heavy rainfall, and the mischeif was accentuated by the thoughtless policy of the Railways in blocking the natural means of drainage. As a result, over 2000 square miles of Northern Bengal were flooded. Sixty lives were lost and whole villages were submerged. More than half the houses collapsed and 12,000 heads of cattle perished.

When this terrible disastar came to his knowledge and he found the Darjeeling gods slow to move, Sir P. C. Ray stepped forward to lead in relief and his clarion call to his countrymen to make good the Government's omission found an echo in every heart. The response was magic. Lakhs of rupees poured in from all parts of India and volunteers by the hundred flocked to his standard. Brilliant youths who had but erstwhile discarded their academic robes to rally round the banner of non-cooperation came out of their "destructive work" and hastened to the service of distressed humanity.

This great achievement drew appreciations from even unexpected quarters ; and this note from the *Manchester Guardian's* correspandent in India gives a fair idea of the impression it created :

" The splendid response was largely due to the remarkable personality and position of Sir P. C. Ray. Sir P. C. Ray is a scientinst of world-wide repute. He cannot be said to be an orthodox Non-co-operator, but he is a very strong Nationalist and a very strong critic of Government. He is also a real organizer and a real teacher.

" I heard an European saying, ' If Mr. Gandhi had only been able to create two more Sir P. C. Rays he would have got Swaraj within this year.' A Bengali student told me, ' If any Government officer or any non-co-operating politicians had called for subscriptions, the public would not have given

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three farthings. But when Sir P. C. Ray calls everyone knows that the money will be spent and well spent and not wasted.' I had the good fortune to see him at Calcutta in his College of Science, and I think I can understand why his countrymen feel so much confidence in him."

In marked contrast to this was the apathy of the Government. No doubt they too organized relief centres but were far too slow. And long after the floods had subsided, for distributing Rs. 20,000 worth of seed to the villagers, they spent Rs. 20,000 in officer's pay and travelling allowances to distributors ! One of the members of the Government even went to the extent of saying that the Government were not a charitable institution. No wonder, therefore, that the *Guardian's* correspondent found that everywhere " the Government had lost immensely in prestige" and the Congress " had won what the Government lost, thanks to the fine work of Sir P. C. Ray's volunteers."

Service of the Motherland.

Swadeshi is the life-breath of his soul and even to-day at the old age of seventy he is busy as a bee, hurrying from one corner of the country to the other, preaching Swadeshi and opening an endless number of exhibitions and museums and bazaars. He was one of the earliest to realize the value of the Charka to the famished peasantry of the land and ever since 1922, he is spreading its gospel far and wide.

He is simple in his habits and the brilliant scientist renowned throughout the five continents, wears the coarsest of Khadar clothes.

And how proud he is to wear them ! To the vast audience of enraptured students, he tucks off his sleeve, bares his arm, and with childish pride and deadly sarcasm points out that his arm is none the worse for the coarse coat. There is not a scratch in it, he says, and the hall echoes with resounding cheers! And with that cheer at least a dozen serge coats go for ever.

For he is the idol of the student world. Silver tongued orators may stir their emotions for a moment, but the Acharya's sincerity goes right down to their heart and for ever finds a home in it.

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Vow of Celibacy and Poverty

His life-long vow of celibacy and poverty is too well-known to need mention here. He has remained a confirmed bachelor and for wealth he has no care. His family is the young band of brilliant scientists that has risen under his guidance and like Cornelia, the Roman matron of old, who pointed out her sons as her best jewels, he points out these young devoted band of workers as his legitimate heirs and treasures.

With his life-blood he has nurtured the Bengal Pharmaceutical Works and other industries, which are now worth crores of rupees. But others draw the dividends while he works night and day. He has not touched a pie. He has drawn salaries by thousands but beyond the meagre pittance of Rs 50 a month, everything has gone to the fund for helping poor students, for these forty and odd years. The students have been so much impressed by his sacrifice, that recently they collected Rs. 16,000 for the Students Prafula Jayanti Fund, And they are utilizing it for the same purpose as his fund.

His modesty is notorious. Foreign degrees and diplomas have been showered upon him but he never parades them. Indeed he has a secret pleasure, one is led to suspect, in suppressing them. He is a C. I. E. and a knight, but throughout the 600 pages of his autobiography you cannot find a single word about them and the writer hunted in vain to know the year in which he was knighted. So well-known has his dislike for titles become, that scarcely anywhere in the papers we find him mentioned as a C. I. E.

His mode of life is simple and almost ascetic. A life long victim to stomach-troubles and insomnia, he has to keep himself fit for his strenuous and busy life by constant and systematic exercise.

He is never tired of denouncing the present system of education and the mass production of graduates as he calls it. The industrial backwardness of the country and the grim poverty that stalks the land pain his heart and the cruel waste in university education irritates him. And everywhere, again and again, he repeats the life stories of self-made men and exhorts the young men to emulate their example. He is

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never tired of condemning their cruel and irresponsible spend-thrift ways in the city, while the peasants starve in the villages. And his advice is characteristic. He never loses sight of the practical side of every reform. He always admonishes the young men about the evil of smoking. But if you persist in smoking, then, he says, smoke at least Swadeshi beedis !

The alarming poverty of the masses and the growing unemployment rents his heart. At times his indignation becomes irrepressible.

"Talk of unemployment !" he scoffs. "Starvation is the order of the day and we have become a nation of starvelings. When one-third of the nation has not known the pleasure of a full stomach for the past half-a-century and more, it is fine indeed to talk of unemployment !"

His capacity for retaining facts and figures is simply amazing. One should see him quoting dates and figures, to supplement his recital of the sorry extinction of our once flourishing national industries or the throttling of our sea-borne trade. His knowledge is wide. Not a book seems to have escaped his notice. From the latest book of Betrand Russel, and the latest Shavian stunts, to the hoary sayings of Patanjali, he has treasured every useful thought in his memory.

Simple and Modest

Withal he is modest—so modest that at times, it is positively amusing. Recently when the Calcutra Corporation honoured him on his 70th birthday, he rose to reply and said, that after all he was but a mediocre drudging along the course of time ! Mediocre indeed ! The distinguished doctor of a dozen coveted degrees, the man who amazed the scientists of the world with his epoch-making discoveries, the master of a dozen languages,the illustrious savant of the Chemical world humbly announcing himself as a mediocre ! That by itself, speaks volumes for his modesty.

A Dream Realized

His love for the motherland is ardent and flaming and the respect he commands is universal. Having established